

AFGHANISTAN



Whatever the press briefings have been saying, Britain has not yet declared war on Afghanistan, nor should we do so. Every day that I wake to the news that no bombing has taken place is a celebration of the restraining role Tony Blair has played with the US Administration since the atrocities of September 11th.

The fragile hope behind this is that we may yet understand that bombing is not the answer to the threat we face, and could turn a tragedy into a wider disaster. Bombing may have been delayed by the problems of finding any target that hasn't already been bombed by others during the last twenty years. But the stronger argument against doing so is that bombing will create more terrorists than it kills. It will also unleash a new round of regional conflicts that we will be sucked into, or blamed for, or both. To avoid this, we have to pursue Osama bin Laden in different terms.

What happened in the USA was terrorism, not war. That is why bin Laden cannot be negotiated with. Pursuing him will require the painstaking patience of the hunt for other international criminals. It will require brains, rather than bombs. In the short-term,, we can be more successful in closing down the Al-Qaida networks, freezing and seizing their funds, isolating and undermining their organisation. Ultimately, we have to bring bin Laden before an International Criminal Court. It is the only moral high ground the West can occupy. And in doing so, we must find the courage to re-found the United Nations, giving it the resources to do the job of delivering an internationalism that tackles the causes of terrorism and not just its most tragic expressions.

If bin Laden must be pursued by stealth, it is his allies who would be strengthened by bombing. Once the missiles fly there will be a green light for all those who see violence as the legitimate road to progress or justice. State terrorism will flourish hand in hand with fundamentalist or nationalist terrorisms.

Putin is only an ally in the current 'war on terrorism' because he wants to bomb the hell out of Chechnya. China's support will demand silence from the West in the face of brutal suppression of internal dissent. In Israel, Sharon is unlikely to seek common ground with the PLO. Search and destroy strategies will all be re-branded as the elimination of terrorist networks. Even in Ireland there has been a hardening of Unionist positions. Eight year-old girls, armed only with fully loaded lunch boxes are now the legitimate targets for pipe bombs. Rather than responding to the New York tragedy by recoiling from the violence, the mood tone has been set for a ruck that everyone seeks to pile into.

I have yet to understand what the targets are in Afghanistan. If removing the Taliban is an acceptable fallback, we ought to ask whether its successors would be an improvement. I have never been a supporter of the Taliban. But they were the ones the West chose to back against the Russians. Our record of intervention has often been to back the most reactionary movements in the region rather than the least. We have delivered military resources that have always outstripped diplomacy and development ones. In consequence, the UN has been sidelined in favour of NATO, with military might

assuming the pre-eminent role in global diplomacy.

There will be no military quick fix to bin Laden's threat or his capture. But in the time it takes to catch him, Britain must give a lead in constructing a new international framework to deliver security and stability. Closing down the lifelines that support terrorism means closing down those that we ourselves (and America) have been enmeshed in. This is the consistency and equity that the developing world will demand in exchange for long-term support. The benchmarks for doing so are easy to outline.

If there is 'incontrovertible evidence' against bin Laden, put it before a panel of international judges. We must get the US to endorse rather than veto the establishment of an international Criminal Court, as the locus where terrorists must be tried.

The UN, given a new mandate to establish 'democracy and development programmes' across the region (not just Afghanistan itself) will also need new resources. Their immediate source is obvious. Billions of pounds have been earmarked for the US 'Star Wars' programme. If nothing else, September 11th demonstrated the folly and irrelevance of this Maginot Line in the sky. It cries out for constructive redeployment. The threats that people fear will not be answered in Afghanistan. They are in our own lands, but we must not define ourselves as the enemy. ID cards would be an increase in surveillance, but not security. The £1 billion they would cost is better used in intelligence based policing and the reduction of risk. Domestically and internationally, these 'risks' require a new framework controlling biological, chemical and biotech research. Not least, we need to reject current plans for nuclear waste reprocessing. Opening up a new round of nuclear shipments, and offering targets the equivalent of 200 Chernobyl's is an increase in avoidable and unnecessary risk we can all do without.

Globally there is also an 'equity' agenda that the West has to address. To engage the poor, the West will have to lose a little and share a lot. In the USA, terrorists went for the symbolic targets of wealth and power. Our response and answer also has to address these symbols and realities. The chasm that divides the rich and the poor, between northern corporations and southern citizens has to be closed. We must do so, not as an alternative for pursuit of bin Laden and other terrorists, but as an essential underpinning of it. Once apprehended, an International Court of Justice will ultimately hold them to account, but it will be in the international court of human values (and its forum within the UN) that our long term security, stability and credibility will have to be sought.